The market and Old City in Sanaa, Yemen, March 2011

1.

Yemen is an ancient country on the southern heel of the Arabian peninsula, the crucible of many of the peoples and customs we now think of as Arab. But to most Westerners, it is little more than a code word for bizarre terror plots. The branch of al-Qaeda based there has
made three efforts to plant bombs on US-bound jetliners, starting with the “crotch bomber” in late 2009, who tried to detonate himself as his flight approached Detroit and succeeded only in burning his own genitals. The plots have grown steadily more sophisticated, and fears of another terror strike originating in Yemen are said to keep President Obama up at night. Yemen is often described in newspaper shorthand as “the ancestral home of Osama bin Laden,” even though his father left there for Saudi Arabia as a very young man.

All this focus on jihad is understandable but sadly reductive, not least because of Yemen’s extraordinary physical beauty: an unearthly landscape of craggy ochre mountains and terraced hillsides where farming has been practiced for thousands of years. It seems strange now that only a few decades ago, hippies and missionaries used to go to Yemen and revel in its remoteness and pre-modern tribal atmosphere.

A more complex Yemen was briefly visible on Western TV screens during the spring of 2011, when a diverse protest movement gathered against Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen’s longtime ruler. It seemed for a moment that he would join Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia’s Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in sudden and ignominious retirement. But Saleh was too clever, and the nascent revolution quickly collapsed into a muddle that left no one happy. The street protests, which had been almost totally peaceful—an extraordinary achievement in a country rife with tribal vendettas—soon gave way to a deadly battle within the Yemeni power elite, as the president and his rivals fought for control in the capital. Saleh staved off the inevitable with threats and false promises, even after a bombing in his palace mosque left him badly wounded. Finally, in November 2011, he signed an agreement that ceded power to his vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, but left the current political system largely in place.

By that time, armed jihadis allied with al-Qaeda had taken full advantage of the chaos and were the de facto rulers of a large swath of southern Yemen. The military, confused and demoralized, had put up almost no resistance, and local government officials fled in terror. The jihadis had declared a Taliban-style emirate in Jaar and other towns, and began winning the affections of many villagers with handouts of water, food, and gasoline (even as their kangaroo sharia courts cut off the hands of thieves). As the Americans looked on in horror, the jihadis threatened to capture Aden, Yemen’s second city and a strategic point of access to international shipping lanes. Not until this June did the Yemeni military—with American assistance—finally force the jihadis to withdraw to the desert.

Saleh’s successor, Hadi—who assumed power in February—has been a pleasant surprise to
American government officials, who tend to view the country through the narrow lens of counterterrorism policy. He appears to have given the Americans carte blanche for drone strikes, and foreign diplomats find him more direct than the famously mercurial and manipulative Saleh. Even some protesters seem happy with his willingness to fire almost all of Saleh’s family members from their sinecures in the security services.

But when it comes to deeper changes, Hadi’s options seem limited. He is dependent for protection and support on some of the same military and tribal figures who have been bleeding the regime of its oil revenues for years. He presides over a bloated and corrupt bureaucracy, a largely ineffective military, and a country riven by powerful tribal and regional divisions, with a de facto rebel statelet in the north and an angry secessionist movement in the south. His country is the poorest in the Arab world, and it is running out of oil and water very fast. The threats of jihad in Yemen are likely to last a long time.

What are the sources of this crisis? Gregory Johnsen, a Ph.D. candidate at Princeton, has been writing incisively about Yemen’s various insurgencies for years, and *The Last Refuge* is an authoritative and deftly written account of al-Qaeda’s Yemeni incarnation. The book is dense with terrorist genealogies, but it also offers a lively portrait of the American government’s stumbling efforts to understand and influence a profoundly alien culture. His account, starting in the 1980s, implicitly places Yemen near the center of the global jihadi movement; it may not be where al-Qaeda started, but it has always furnished many of the movement’s foot soldiers, and it has now succeeded Afghanistan as the US government’s most urgent concern about counterterrorism.

2.

Ask a Yemeni about al-Qaeda, and you are likely to hear that it does not exist. Or that it is a phantom created by President Saleh to squeeze money from the Americans and keep ordinary Yemenis down. I have heard a hundred variations on this theme, even from people who had suffered from jihadist violence. There is a shadow of truth in it. Yemen, like many other Arab countries, encouraged its people to volunteer and fight against the Russians in Afghanistan during the 1980s, with government ministers and prominent clerics helping to arrange flights to Peshawar.

After it was over, other Arab governments were often deeply suspicious of the returning Mujahideen, seeing them as potential troublemakers. But Saleh welcomed them back, because he sensed that he would need them. Yemen at the time was divided into two
mutually hostile states: a Marxist south, the successor state to the former British colony that had achieved independence in 1967; and a nominally democratic north. Saleh, the northern president, had long dreamed of crushing the Marxists and unifying the country, and he knew the Mujahideen hated socialism in all its forms. As the decade came to an end and South Yemen began losing its Soviet patron, Saleh sensed his opportunity. A peremptory unification was declared in 1990, but the celebrations masked a clash of egos and ideologies. There would be a reckoning.

One of the strengths of Johnsen’s book is its patient tracing of the Yemeni thread in the Afghan conflict against the Soviet occupiers and all that took place afterward. At the end of that war in 1990, for instance, bin Laden made plans with one of his fellow warriors—a Yemeni named Tariq al-Fadhli—to continue the jihad in Yemen, where they would force out the Marxists and build an Islamic state. It never happened. But in 1994, after the southerners balked at Saleh’s autocratic ways and a civil war broke out, the Yemeni president called Fadhli and asked him to muster his old wartime companions against the Marxists. The second jihad took place after all, with Fadhli commanding a makeshift brigade and bin Laden providing money and weapons from over the border in Saudi Arabia.

The war was over in two months, and afterward, as Johnsen writes, the jihadis were given free rein to plunder Aden, South Yemen’s capital. Saleh wanted to send a brutal and indelible message, and the jihadis were the perfect vehicle. They looted and smashed the remnants of secular rule in the south—the beachside hotels, the beer gardens. They even destroyed tombstones in graveyards, seeing them as a temptation to idolatry. The worst damage came in the period after the northern victory in July 1994, when Saleh simply stole vast swaths of private and public land across the south, deeding it to those who’d helped him in the war, including the Mujahideen.

The war left Saleh deeply indebted to the jihadis, and to their clerical patron, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, who became a central figure in Yemeni politics as a leader of Islah, Yemen’s Islamist party. Yemen had never been very fertile ground for Salafism, the puritanical religious strain that is dominant in Saudi Arabia, to the north. But the Saudis had been funding religious schools to spread their influence, and Saleh tended to favor Salafis, mainly because they preach strict obedience to temporal rulers. This was not quite true of their ideological siblings, the jihadis, but Saleh reckoned he could control them too. Through the 1990s, jihadis who were pursued by the police in Egypt and other Arab
countries found refuge in Yemen. It was natural enough for them to start viewing Yemen as a platform for attacks against what they called “the far enemy”—the US.

3.

The first blow was the suicide attack on the USS Cole, a destroyer that was stationed in Aden’s harbor, in October 2000. But the loss of seventeen US sailors, especially just before a presidential election, was not enough to shake the complacency of either country. September 11 was different. Saleh recognized right away that this was the start of a new era, and of a profoundly uneasy relationship with the United States. He flew to Washington soon afterward, eager to pledge his cooperation. In public, the Bush administration declared Saleh an important partner in the war on terror. But behind the scenes, there was extreme frustration with Saleh’s refusal to push harder against radicals.

Edmund Hull arrived as the new US ambassador to Sanaa in late 2001, and his memoir illustrates, in its dry and understated way, how bad these tensions got. There were “semiserious suggestions to invade the country,” during this period, Hull writes. “The discussions indicated that the ‘target versus partner’ debate was far from resolved.” At the same time, Hull became a target of Saleh’s anger at American arrogance. At one point in *High-Value Target*, Hull describes being summoned to the palace to have Saleh scream at him, at length, over a memo that suggested Yemen’s provinces could be governed more effectively. (In fact, they were scarcely being governed at all.)

Part of the problem, for the Americans, was Saleh’s long-established habit of ruling the country like a tribal chief. When the US asked him to hand over or jail terrorism suspects—including some of those wanted for the bombing of the Cole—he would sometimes instead arrange a house arrest on his own authority, removing the man from jail and exacting a promise of guardianship from his family. Saleh saw the Americans’ demands as part of a mutual exchange of favors, and he expected to be repaid; the Americans felt they were merely asking for the rule of law, and responded with righteous scorn.

But the problem was not confined to Saleh himself. Yemen’s chief intelligence agency, the Political Security Organization, was shot through with terrorist sympathizers. Mysterious prison breaks involving al-Qaeda members have been almost comically frequent. When one of the recruits in Ayman al-Zawahiri’s radical network walked into the PSO’s offices to inform on the group in 1998, the officer who recorded his account promptly called the jihadis to warn them they had a traitor within their ranks.
For their part, the Americans were often strikingly clumsy and ignorant in their dealings with Yemen, especially in the first panicky years after the September 11 attacks. The nadir may have been the arrest and imprisonment of Muhammad al-Muayyad, a Yemeni cleric who was extradited to the United States on grandiose and baseless terror charges. Johnsen’s unraveling of this little subplot is enough to make anyone cringe. Muayyad was known in his country as the “Father of Orphans” because of his charitable work. Like many other people in Yemen, he did raise money for Hamas. But his real sin was being acquainted with Muhammad al-Ansi, a chronically dishonest informant for the FBI in Brooklyn who was desperate to earn money. Ansi cooked up a story of Muayyad as a terrorist mastermind, sold it to the bureau, and lured the aging cleric to Germany for a sting operation with a promise of donations to Muayyad’s charities.

Handcuffed and flown to New York, Muayyad was tricked out as a Bush administration success story: then Attorney General John Ashcroft declared that he had “personally handed Osama bin Laden $20 million from his terrorist fundraising network.” Even after the informant’s lies were exposed, it took five years before a federal appeals court freed Muayyad to return to Yemen.

Despite such blunders, the intense American pressure on Yemen, along with new military
assistance, had its results. In late 2002 the leader of al-Qaeda’s Yemen branch, a veteran of the Afghan jihad named Abu Ali al-Harithi, was killed by a drone strike as he rode through the desert one hundred miles east of Yemen’s capital. Much of the organization’s leadership was also killed or jailed. Soon afterward, the Americans, busy with Iraq, began to lose interest. When Saleh made his next pilgrimage to Washington in late 2005, he was hoping for more military hardware and development aid, the reward for his cooperation in Bush’s war on terror. Instead, he received lectures on corruption and the lack of democratic reform, and was told that aid to Yemen would be cut. On the flight home, Johnsen writes, Saleh fell into one of his rages and screamed at his aides, firing his entire team of economic advisers. (He rehired almost all of them soon afterward.)

Over the next few years, al-Qaeda in Yemen retooled and became far more dangerous. A suicide car bombing assault on the US embassy compound in Sanaa in late 2008 was the warning shot. There had been hints that al-Qaeda was growing more powerful—a large-scale prison escape, an influx of foreigners—but Saleh was distracted by other, more serious challenges to his rule, including an intermittent armed rebellion in northwestern Yemen. He still viewed al-Qaeda as an American obsession.

He was wrong: the jihadis, having once viewed him as almost an ally, now aimed to get rid of him, along with the royal family of Saudi Arabia next door. Many of the new al-Qaeda men were refugees from Saudi Arabia, which was cracking down hard on its network in the kingdom. Yemen was a much safer place for them, and the long desert border between the two countries was porous. The Saudi and Yemeni branches of the group officially merged, forming al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP.

It was around this time, in early 2009, that the newly energized group released a video declaring its intention to attack the United States directly. Two of the men in the video had spent time in Guantánamo, which provided one obvious motive. The others are not entirely clear, though some have speculated that the cleric Anwar al-Awlaki—an American citizen born in New Mexico—pushed the group in that direction. Some of the newer members had fought against the US military in Iraq, and that may have provided another motive. One thing seems clear: the men who remade al-Qaeda were a different breed from the earlier generation. They were toughened by fresh battle experience, and less willing to be co-opted by Saleh with offers of money and reconciliation, as many veterans of the Afghan conflict had been. They had also learned valuable lessons from the disaster of Iraq, where al-Qaeda’s indiscriminate slaughter had alienated the local population.
The new Yemeni al-Qaeda men worked hard to ingratiate themselves with local communities, providing much-needed schoolteachers, helping to mediate conflicts, and marrying into the tribes. Johnsen provides intriguing mini-biographies of some of these men, drawn mostly from Yemeni newspaper accounts and interviews with people who have met them. Among the most important are Ibrahim and Abdullah Asiri, two Saudi brothers who had been inseparable since childhood. Ibrahim, an explosives expert who designed all three of the bombs al-Qaeda has tried to detonate on US-bound jetliners, is now almost surely at the top of the American target list. The brothers were radicalized in Saudi Arabia after Ibrahim was arrested for trying to fight in Iraq, and they fled across the border together to Yemen.

In the summer of 2009 the two brothers designed a clever and macabre plot that came very close to what would have been a devastating blow. The younger brother, Abdullah, traveled to the Saudi border to pose as a defector to Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, the chief of Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism agency. Abdullah had passed through security by putting a small bomb—designed by his brother—up his rectum. The prince allowed him into his study and embraced him. Moments later, Abdullah’s cell phone rang, and the detonator fired. “Abdullah’s body absorbed most of the blast as the explosion went straight up, separating his head from his body and blowing a blood-spattered hole in the roof,” Johnsen writes. “Somehow bin Nayif, who had been standing less than a yard away from Abdullah, survived the blast.”

4.

By far the most intriguing personality in al-Qaeda, at least from a Western perspective, was Awlaki. Unlike most jihadis, Awlaki was an intellectual with a cosmopolitan background, a man who once asked his father to bring him copies of *Moby Dick* and *A Farewell to Arms* in prison. He spent most of his adult life in the United States, first as a graduate student, then as a failed entrepreneur and as a budding Muslim cleric. For all his later anti-Americanism, he liked blondes, and insisted that his last wife—introduced to him by a Danish intelligence agent posing as a friendly jihadi—be light-haired and European. It is still not clear exactly when he made the break from orthodox Muslim to bloodthirsty promoter of “lone wolf” terrorist attacks. He met with and counseled two of the September 11 hijackers, and there are people who believe he even had foreknowledge of the plot. This kind of varied past is pretty rare among jihadis, with the obvious exception of leading figures like bin Laden and Zawahiri. Jihadis are almost by definition unapproachable, and tend to be known by their propaganda.*
Johnsen devotes little space to al-Awlaki, perhaps because—as he has written elsewhere—he believes his importance in the group has been overstated. Awlaki was a latecomer to al-Qaeda, and it is possible that he had little effect on its targeting decisions; certainly the group’s explosives expert, Ibrahim al-Asiri, seems a more important figure. The US government obviously felt otherwise. The decision to deliberately kill an American citizen who had not been charged with any crime—profoundly troubling to many Americans concerned to protect rights—appears to have been based at least in part on Awlaki’s enormous charisma as a promoter of violent jihad, and his ability to inspire others to strike at the United States.

Awlaki’s exact role within al-Qaeda is still not well understood, though it seems certain that he helped inspire several violent attacks, and did more than that in the case of Umar Farouk Abdumutallab, the young Nigerian who tried to blow himself up while in a plane over Detroit. Awlaki is also thought to have had a part in the Yemeni al-Qaeda branch’s energetic move into online media, especially its slick and lurid English-language jihad magazine, *Inspire*. With its color graphics and almost campy invitations to gruesome violence (“How to Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom”), it was edited and partly written by Samir Khan, another American citizen in the group who was killed in the same drone strike as Awlaki. The magazine put out an issue earlier this year after the death of its two major architects; one of the current staff members is Awlaki’s Croatian wife.

Will Yemen’s al-Qaeda branch continue to attack the United States now that Awlaki and Samir Khan are gone? For that matter, will any of the newer jihadi groups that have sprung up in the chaos that followed the Arab uprisings of 2011? The motives are still there, and if anything, the American campaign of drone strikes would seem to suggest a reason for revenge. Some of the earlier targeted strikes by the US in Yemen resulted in civilian casualties that may have earned sympathy for al-Qaeda, or at least additional anger at the United States. And there may well be other Americans lurking in the Yemeni desert. But the drone campaign could just as easily convince the jihadis to stick to easier terrain.

Other jihadi groups, like the newly energized ones across North Africa, have less reason and less ability to carry out such ambitious projects to attack the US. The killing of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens in Libya in September raised fears of an anti-American jihad, but the men who killed him appear to have been very local in their associations and ideas. Building a bomb that can get to the United States, and finding someone who is willing and able to carry it, are not easy.
If Yemen does cease to be a terrorist threat to the United States, what will it mean for Yemenis? Before the *Cole* bombing, Yemen received virtually no foreign aid or attention. American presidents scarcely knew where it was, and tended to treat it as a subsidiary of Saudi Arabia. Since then, the mayhem directed at the US has brought Yemen hundreds of millions of dollars in American military assistance and training, along with billions in pledges from the “Friends of Yemen,” an international coalition that aims to help it address the root causes of terrorism with development and education programs. Yemen’s threat to the United States has made it a crucial source of intelligence as well. As one Yemeni official put it to me: “Yemen used to be the tail of the Saudi cow. Now it is its own cow.” Much of this could be lost if Yemen became a danger only to itself.

As it happens, that is not very likely. Even if al-Qaeda gives up on attacking the US, Yemen is now a minefield of threats that are likely to keep the aid money flowing for years to come. Iran has started to poke its nose into Yemen—offering aid to various opposition groups, sending small shipments of weapons. The Huthi rebel group that now controls northwestern Yemen is modeled on Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militia. That alone is terrifying to Saudi Arabia, which is just across the border, and fought a brief and somewhat humiliating war with the Huthis in late 2009. And then there are the natural dangers. Yemen is rapidly running out of the one resource that is really necessary for life: the World Bank has estimated that Sanaa could soon become the first global capital that has no water. Sadly, the obscurity that once lured travelers to Yemen is not likely to return anytime soon.

—November 9, 2012

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One remarkable recent exception to this trend is Ken Ballen’s *Terrorists in Love* (Free Press, 2011), a series of portraits describing the inner lives and motives of jihadis from Iraq, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia based on years of interviews.  

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